



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the National Initiative

2024 Volume II: A History of Black People as Readers: A Genealogy of Critical Literacy

Parody and Counter-Narrative in Art: Viewing Against the Grain

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By my senior year in high school, I knew that I wanted to go to college and become an English teacher. I figured that the best way for me to prepare for college was to take two English courses my senior year. One course was AP Composition, the other course was Honors African American literature. These two classes were extremely different.

In the AP Composition class, the students were generally white. The teacher was white. The authors we read like David Sedaris, Eudora Welty, E.M. Forster, and Ernest Hemingway were white. We even read a speech that George W. Bush had given after 9/11 as a study in rhetoric. These were the authors and writing that were supposed to model high aspects of syntax and style. Implicit in these selections was a very narrow view of literature that was worthy of studying.

In the African American literature course, I was one of only two white students. The teacher was a veteran Black teacher who had taught for nearly forty years, and the curriculum was a survey of significant African American and African writers that made impacts on literature. We read writers like Zora Neal Hurston, James Baldwin, August Wilson, Lorraine Hansberry, Chinua Achebe, and Wole Soyinka. I still remember how she told us a story about trying to rent an apartment around the University of Illinois at Champaign. She called around apartments for rent, making very pleasant conversations with landlords until she showed up in person to be turned down for vacant apartments. I remember her being especially accommodating to me when I volunteered to share my thoughts in class, knowing that it isn't easy to express thoughts when they aren't centered in the normative collective experience of the class.

Every high school student should have the opportunity to be in both environments at some point in their academic career. Students should read texts that feel both familiar and reflective of their own experiences, but also experience texts that are far removed from lived experiences and broaden horizons and grapple with difficult histories and legacies in different ways. It is in this way that students develop historical empathy and understanding; students need the opportunity to ask questions with a skilled practitioner who has lived experiences and content knowledge that can respond to the questions they raise with accuracy and insight.

Marginalized communities meaningfully engage with art and literature; what that engagement looks like may at times look different or require both my students and I to use the tools we have. My students are a joy to teach. This doesn't happen organically; it takes careful planning, organization and knowledge of my students to pull together texts that speak to their experiences, interests, and abilities. I want my students to have

experience with how canonical texts are traditionally interpreted and understood. But I also want to do so in a way that underscores the resilience and agency of Black and Brown readers in shaping their own narratives and interpretations within a predominantly white literary canon. Simply put, I want my students to have the best of both worlds that I got to experience as a student in CPS. They will get this by better understanding how parody, satire, interrogating authorial intent, and using counter narratives have worked as tools to reclaim power and reexamine difficult histories.

Teaching Context and Rationale

Mark Twain Elementary School is a Chicago Public School located on the Southwest side of the city. The student population served by the school is roughly 79% low income and ranges from grades pre-K to 8th grade. The population is also roughly 90% Latino and 9% white. Students that are diverse learners account for roughly 10% of the student population, and roughly 16% of the students in the school receive additional supports as part of Twain’s bilingual program.¹ This unit is designed for about 97 sixth grade general education students. Many of these students are not proficient writers as they enter sixth grade and struggle to compose writing that reflects the language of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS).

While I have taught for 18 years, my teaching practice continues to evolve through my participation in the Yale National Initiative, professional learning as a Chicago Public Schools employee, and emerging best practice. In my district, Chicago Public Schools, there has been a significant push to have students engage with more culturally responsive and relevant topics and texts. It also connects to some texts that I teach in another unit that I have previously developed at Yale under the direction of Professor Jessica Brantley and explores them more critically and extends the learning while I teach that unit. This unit takes all those factors into consideration.

Content Objectives

George Washington: An Exploration in Three Art Pieces



Washington Crossing the Delaware, Emanuel Leutze, 1851²



George Washington Carver Crossing the Delaware: Page from an American History Textbook, Robert Colescott, 1975³

In a unit that I developed several years ago in a seminar titled *The Illustrated Page: Medieval Manuscripts to New Media* under the direction of Jessica Brantley, Associate Professor of English at Yale, I developed a unit that explores how to introduce students to modes of analyzing paintings such as *Washington Crossing the Delaware* to show how those modes of analysis can be adapted to literary texts. This unit has been the way that I have started my school year the last several years.

In the unit, we look at four paintings as closely as we would a literary text: *Guernica*, *Washington Crossing the Delaware*, *The Problem We All Have*, and *Detroit Industrial*. During the unit, we develop and practice having robust classroom discussions about our initial observations. I lead students to engage in research with classmates, I share my own research that I have gathered in the unit, and then I have my students share a brief reflection on each piece before I move on to the next piece. I am developing this unit to extend the learning in that unit by adding a couple more art pieces that can or have been read against the grain by other artists.

One of the central pieces that we explore is *George Washington Crossing the Delaware*. *George Washington Crossing the Delaware* by Emanuel Gottlieb Leutze shows George Washington and a group of soldiers in a small boat crossing the Delaware River; it is considered to be both romanticized and inaccurate.⁴ It suggests that the soldiers are going to launch a surprise attack on the British troops. The popular retelling of the event is that during the American Revolution, the Continental Army struggled under the leadership of George Washington, losing control of New York City and other key points in the colonies. In hopes of catching the British army off guard, they planned a surprise attack that involved crossing the Delaware River with 5,400 troops to engage the other side at Trenton, New Jersey. Attacking on Christmas night, Washington and roughly 2,400 troops crossed the partially frozen river in three locations, reaching the New Jersey side before dawn. The rest of the troops he had at his disposal met up the following morning to descend upon the British side on December 26th. The British side was outmanned and underestimated the ability of Washington's men because of a series of successes. Almost 1,000 British troops were taken captive and news of Washington's victory "raised the spirits of the American colonists, who previously feared that the Continental Army was incapable of victory."⁵ While that general retelling is accurate, Leutze romanticized a few other parts. For example, the crossing was at night under the guise of poor weather conditions. This differs from daylight that is included in the painting. Washington also didn't lead the charge; he and 40 others crossed the Delaware led by William Blackler, "a salty, savvy Massachusetts fisherman who most certainly would never have permitted Washington, rank be damned, to stand during so treacherous a crossing."⁶ Leutze's interpretation of the event creates a much more powerful narrative than having Washington restrained at the back of a boat. This myth-making is rich material for me to explore with my students.

In the painting, Leutze depicts Washington as a decisive and powerful leader. Washington stands taller than all of the other figures in the piece; he is also almost centered in the piece next to the American flag. He holds a brass telescope, wears a heavy saber, and is flanked by another future president of the United States, James Monroe. A bright star shines upon him as if he was chosen by God to conduct this battle. The river is filled with ice, and the boat is filled with 13 men that represent "a cross-section of the American colonies"... an African American, a New England seaman wearing a tarpaulin jacket, a Scottish immigrant, a rower with an unclear gender designation, a woman, riflemen, farmers, a merchant, and even someone who appears ill with a bandaged head.⁷ All of these people represent the various trades and colonies; all have a common cause to see the Revolutionary Army win. There is forward movement and momentum in the piece as it moves from right-to-left; this victory had the same impact for the Revolutionary Army. This movement forces the viewer to read the ship, as most viewer's eyes are habitually trained to view from left-to-right. In this reading, it

becomes clear that the victory that created momentum and sustained the army and citizens of the colonies was the direct product of Washington's virtuous leadership.

This piece creates a heroic and inaccurate narrative about George Washington's actions during a battle during the American Revolution to which Frank O'Hara irreverently responds, "Now that our hero has come back to us/ in his white pants and we know his nose/ trembling like a flag under fire/we see the calm cold river is supporting/ our forces, the beautiful history."⁸ Frank O'Hara is not the only artist that has responded to the piece. Robert Colescott's painting *George Washington Carver Crossing the Delaware: Page from an American History Textbook* is another critical response to original work. In the first unit I wrote, I briefly touch upon the fact that Colescott's work existed and that it was a parody of the original piece by Leutze, but I was not entirely sure about what else I could say about the piece to bring it to life for my sixth graders.

A couple aspects of seminar discussion have helped me to better understand how I can frame inquiry around the piece. Fellows discussed how critical literacy is a way of maneuvering and navigating through texts that may not have been created with you in mind, paying close attention to instances in which Black readers adapted reading practices to meet their needs. This included learning about how enslaved Black readers used the Bible to learn how to read or learned how to read and write for the explicit purpose of writing their own pass to freedom. Colescott observes about the work, "What I did was to take something that is admirable, mess it up, and make you question everything that the artwork stood for."⁹ This is very much in the spirit of the work that we are doing this year in seminar. In this year's seminar, I learned that African American readers and artists often employ devices such as parody and counter-narrative to critique and reinterpret historical narratives, cultural norms, and societal expectations, often reading against the grain to construct meaning.

The textbook definition of a parody is "a work that mimics the style of another work, artist, or genre in an exaggerated way, usually for comic effect."¹⁰ *The Encyclopedia Britannica* observes that "parody is typically negative in intent: it calls attention to a writer's perceived weaknesses or a school's overused conventions and seeks to ridicule them. Parody can, however, serve a constructive purpose, or it can be an expression of admiration."¹¹ Many Black and Brown artists have created parodic versions of canonical texts that exaggerate or distort elements of the original text for critical effect. Consider Colescott's work. It went up for auction in 2021, selling for over \$15,000,000. In the description of the piece, Sotheby's makes a concise observation about why it is an important contemporary piece of art.

In the present work, the artist takes on an iconic image that within the public consciousness represents American ideals of freedom and political liberation, unveiling its inherent racial bias. The artist turns the original image on its head, holding a mirror to American culture using essentialized racial caricatures to underscore the glaring omission of the African American narrative within the prevailing representations of American history, and highlight how that history is built on a legacy of racism and inequity.¹²

Colescott recreates Leutze's scene with George Washington Carver as the focus, replacing George Washington as the singular focus of the ship. Surrounding Carver on the ship are a cast of Black individuals that are informed by racist imagery and meant to represent racist stereotypes of the twentieth century. Some of the racist stereotypes represented in the painting that were a part of American mainstream consciousness include "a cigar-smoking banjo player, a servantly chef, an inebriated farmer, and a "mammy" figure, among others."¹³ This type of parody can serve as a form of cultural commentary, challenging the authority of the

original text and offering alternative perspectives.

By placing George Washington Carver, a prominent African American scientist, in a scene traditionally dominated by white figures, the parody directly questions how to tell the story of our nation's history. The viewer is left to wonder why noteworthy figures like Carver are often left out of our nation's retelling of its history. Colescott surrounds Carver with stereotypes. In doing that, he is almost questioning the viewer about how their predisposition to stereotypes influences what they see in Black people, even successful and significant people like Carver, and in history. The argument seems to suggest that individuals like Carver deserve their rightful place in the collective memory of the nation like have been created by art for figures like George Washington.

The Use of Counter-Narratives

Walking down the aisles of Sterling and Bass Libraries is one of the more joyful aspects of participating in the Yale National Initiative. One can find information on nearly any topic imaginable. While looking for information, I came across a book titled *Another Day in the Death of America*. I picked it up. I was curious and not entirely sure of how the author imagined America dying, given that there could be many possibilities: climate, political dysfunction, civil unrest. The premise of the book is that on average, on any given day in the United States, roughly seven young people are killed by gun violence. On weekends, that average tracks a bit higher, closer to ten. The author selected a random date, in this case November 23, 2013, to capture and recreate the narratives associated with ten young people who were murdered that day in different regions of the United States to tell their story.

In the introduction to the book, the author defines a clear purpose, "This book takes a snapshot of a society in which these deaths are uniquely possible and that has a political culture apparently uniquely incapable of creating a world in which they might be prevented."¹⁴ The author's purpose in the book closely aligns with the purpose of this unit. My goal is to elevate a couple of key historical narratives presented in art that have been overlooked by time or not fully elevated to their rightful place in history, or in keeping in the spirit of our seminar, reading a text or work of art in an alternative way. For narratives that suggest a difficult history, I am proposing that students be taught creative ways to reimagine how the world could be through an exploration of counter-narrative. Imagining a more equitable, fair and just society is the first step in creating it. In this respect, considering and actively working to create counter-narratives can be a powerful tool to counter unjust situations in the past and in the present day. Before I can have students explore creating a counter-narrative, they need to see how others have created them.

Counter-narrative is a relatively new term to me. I first heard of it during a professional learning session earlier this last school year. A comprehensive definition of counter-narrative is provided by the Center for Intercultural Dialogue at Universidad Pontificia Bolivariana, Sede Central Medellín, Colombia and is also included in the teacher resource section.

Counter-narrative refers to the narratives that arise from the vantage point of those who have been historically marginalized. The idea of "counter-" itself implies a space of resistance against traditional domination. A counter-narrative goes beyond the notion that those in relative positions of power can just tell the stories of those in the margins. Instead, these must come from the margins, from the perspectives and voices of those individuals. A counter-narrative thus goes beyond the telling of stories that take place in the margins. The effect of a counter-narrative is to empower and give agency to those communities. By choosing their own words and telling their

own stories, members of marginalized communities provide alternative points of view, helping to create complex narratives truly presenting their realities.¹⁵

This definition requires a bit of unpacking. It lays out a number of criteria. The first is that the story or response needs to be told from a group that is historically marginalized. The next criteria is that it allows for resistance against the traditional domination rather than allowing the traditional individuals in power to tell history's stories. Another criteria of a counter-narrative is that empowers and gives agency to the marginalized group by allowing for that group to use their own words in telling their own stories that are often complex but present their reality or lived experience. One piece that clearly meets all of the criteria of counter-narrative is *Shadows of Liberty* by Titus Kaphar.¹⁶



Shadows of Liberty, Titus Kaphar, 2016

In this painting, displayed in Yale University Art Gallery, George Washington is covered in rusty nails and strips of cloth contain the names of slaves that he held at his plantation. If our nation's collective memory engages in myth making to elevate our leaders, we also need to engage in truth telling to ensure our history is accurate. Counter-narrative can play a very powerful role in communicating historical truths when myths have been allowed to grow unchecked. In considering the criteria for counter-narrative and *Shadows of Liberty*, it is apparent that the art is a powerful example of counter-narrative. He is a Black artist that takes great pride in reimagining subjects in art history and broader history.¹⁷ In the painting, Kaphar nails the names of the slaves that George Washington held in his possession to his head and upper body, in similar fashion that Jesus Christ might have been crucified. Unlike Jesus, whose necessary death was an act of benevolence and sacrifice for mankind, the names that are attached to Washington are the ones that were sacrificed to create the myth of the man, and their sacrifice was not necessary or even appreciated.

Washington did not feed, cloth, or house his slaves in abodes that were comfortable or accommodating for his captives, often separating families to direct labor where skills were needed; his slaves often struggled with cloth shortages and had to use their blankets as tools to gather plant materials for animal bedding.¹⁸ Kaphar challenges the glorified image of Washington by covering him up to his eyes with the names of slaves that he kept in bondage for the duration of his life. Kaphar makes Washington and his sad horse contend with historical truth. We are left with an awkward Washington, one who positions his sword in defensive posture, almost to suggest to the viewer to back off. It doesn't project the calm stewardship that many care to associate with the Founding Father. It reclaims some of the power and agency that the slaves that he owned

lost under his ownership; it makes it possible for a modern viewer to question his motives and grapple with his status as an American hero. George Washington's legacy is complicated. While he is an influential Founding Father and created tremendous precedents as our first President, he was clearly not a benevolent slave master because no such thing can exist.

Like the parallels and contradictions that were drawn between *Washington Crossing the Delaware*, *George Washington Carver Crossing the Delaware: Page from an American History Textbook*, and *Shadows of Liberty*, bringing two or more pieces together side-by-side can help facilitate rich discussion. Students are often not able to see what is normative in the dominant narrative. These aspects need to be teased out and explained before being able to understand and appreciate the critical interpretation of events or experiences offered in the counter-narrative. Students need to recognize that counter-narratives offer marginalized voices the opportunity to reframe the discussion by introducing new perspectives that are absent or misrepresented in the dominant story and to make a public point that is often complex and critical of the way the history is traditionally told. Both serve to broaden the discussion and encourage the critical thinking so many teachers think is important to build for their students. A perfect case study for my students to explore this dominant and counter-narrative binary can be seen in holding up two pieces together: *American Gothic* vs. *The New American Gothic*.

A Case Study in Counter-narrative: *American Gothic* vs. *The New American Gothic*



American Gothic, Grant Wood, 1930¹⁹



The New American Gothic, Criselda Vasquez, 2017²⁰ (used with written consent of the artist)

American Gothic by Grant Wood

The painting *American Gothic* by Grant Wood features a stern-looking farmer standing beside a woman who is often initially thought to be his daughter. The artist sent the piece to Chicago's Art Institute as part of an annual exhibition of American painting and sculpture, where it was purchased for \$300 dollars and still is a part of the museum's holdings today.²¹ When we sent this painting, October of 1930, Woods was thirty-nine-years old and was living in a world that was facing serious hardships due to the Great Depression. During the start of the 20th Century, significant migrations saw people move away from rural environments to cities in search of employment and other opportunities. In doing so, there was a sense that urban life represented progress and Jazz Age glitz, that is until the start of the Great Depression began to call that thinking into question. Some looked back to rural life as the 'real America' that was self-sufficient, resilient, and free from

corrupting foreign influences. ²² Thinking about some of the world events that were shaping Wood's thinking, it is interesting to think about some modern parallels.

There is still a significant rural/urban divide that shapes the contentious political and civic discourse of our nation. There is also a significant concern in political discourse about the nature of corrupting foreign influences, with former President Trump referring to migrants during his campaign entering our country as "ruining the blood" of our nation.²³ A significant segment of the American population want to "Make America Great Again" by returning to some unnamed and evasive time in American history when things were better. A modern viewer may want to be more than casual in his or her interpretation of *American Gothic*. In the opening to Barbara Haskell's text, *Grant Wood: American Gothic and Other Fables*, Weinberg observes that Woods is a "more complex and interesting figure" than he is often given credit for among art critics; he argues that the subjects that he painted were "myths, not facts" and "if they are facts, they are his facts."²⁴ He argues in Haskell's introduction that the imagery that Woods includes in his works are often filled with a lot of potential meanings, even though the figures may seem a bit benign to the casual viewer.

In the painting, both figures stand in front of a house with a distinct Gothic window, which is where the painting's title is derived. *American Gothic* is suggestive of the hardworking, no-nonsense character of rural Americans during the Great Depression. The farmer and the woman are presented with serious, stoic expressions and conservative dress which suggests a life of hard work and dedication. Besides the Gothic window, the house that they are standing in front of is well cared for and reflective of rural life. The sky is blue and cloudless.²⁵ The painting has become part of America's dominant narrative, leading to many parodies and critical responses. An excellent resource that illuminates some of these parodies and responses has been included in the teacher resource section of the unit.²⁶ The article is filled with information and could be used directly with students to help them interpret the piece.

***The New American Gothic* by Criselda Vasquez**

One critical viewer and reader of *American Gothic* is the artist Criselda Vasquez. Her response to the work with her own piece, *The New American Gothic*, is a carefully crafted counter-narrative that speaks to many of the same issues that Grant Wood was grappling with in 1930. Unlike many of the parodies that strike a tone of humor or superficiality, Vasquez's work employs a lot of the same sentiments across time, space and location. In her piece, you see a couple positioned in a similar manner to the Wood piece. In the piece, the subjects are Mexican. The father does some type of landscaping type work, as he is holding a tool to till earth (drawing parallels with the man in the original work who is holding a pitchfork). The woman in the painting is holding cleaning supplies to suggest that she might clean homes. They are situated in front of their dirty, red Astrovan that has smiley faces drawn in the dirty windows. This was a common car of choice for Mexican families during the 90's. Looking at it, it is reminiscent of William Carlos Williams poem "The Red Wheelbarrow." Instead of so much depends on the red wheelbarrow, a viewer could rewrite the poem to fit this image: So much depends on the red work van/glazed with dirty and drawings/beside the hardworking and proud couple.

Thinking about the criteria for counter-narrative that I raised earlier: The response needs to be told from a group that is historically marginalized; it must allow for resistance against the individuals in power to tell history's stories, and it empowers and gives agency to the marginalized group by allowing for that group to use their own words in telling their own stories that are often complex but present their reality or lived experience. This piece checks all of the boxes of being a compelling counter-narrative. Consider Vasquez's artist statement about the piece.

As the American-born daughter of two Mexican immigrants, I illustrate their plight and the plight of many in my community with my art. I want to expose the heart-breaking pain of what a Mexican immigrant's family goes through. I focus on bringing my family's world into the light and out of the shadows. My paintings are best described as visual comments on the hidden daily reality of the Mexican-American experience. These portraits and still lifes reveal my family in their own authentic environment and expose how I live in two worlds. My paintings layer the American culture over the Mexican world. I feel society needs to be aware of the humanity on the other side of the door. The two most important people in my life, my parents, are also the two who motivated me to develop such a strong concept. When my parents pose for these paintings, their faces are reduced to extremely raw and somehow vulnerable expressions. Sadly, they strive to be invisible every day. They don't have to pretend to illustrate the invisible. They have dealt with constant rejection, suspicion and fear so long, that it seems now that it comes naturally to them. I strive to capture how their expressions deliver that sense of tiredness, resignation, and quiet acceptance. It seems relevant to show that underneath all the politicization and underserved labeling this community receives, these are regular people just like all of us. In the long tradition of immigrants that come to the United States, they have made homes here and they are just trying to live a simple life with a bit of security and hopefulness for their children.²⁷

Mexicans who have come the United States as immigrants have faced tremendous obstacles as they acclimate and assimilate to American culture. The artist seeks to elevate and make visible what she refers to as their "plight" that is her parent's "daily reality."²⁸ The same sense of resolve and compositional steadiness that is evident in the original Wood piece are evident in Vazquez's art; the garden tools in both providing a division both right down the middle with both male figures owing their existence to their capacity to work the land. The second criteria for a counter-narrative is that it allows for resistance against the individuals in power to tell history's stories; here Vazquez is using her art to tell her parent's story because they are too busy and self-censoring to do it themselves; she notes how her parents "have dealt with constant rejection, suspicion and fear so long."²⁹ They are not in a position to do what their daughter can do with her art. Thinking about the final criteria of marginalized communities being able to tell their own stories, this artist uses an iteration of canonical art piece to question what is a "real" American? If Wood's work suggested to his audience in 1930 with some historical whimsy and nostalgia that the "real" Americans of the time were the ones that stoically remained in rural settings, working hard and living right, then Vazquez critically addresses the same concerns with her work. Vazquez affirms people like her parents, who might be equally stoic as hardworking Wood's farmer couples, so that they and their story is visible and elevated.

Teaching Strategies

Strategy One: Four Quadrant Art Analysis

To discuss art in my classroom with students, I have learned about and use four quadrant analysis with my students. Instead of having my students look at an entire piece of art at once, I will have students look at the four quadrants of a given piece and focus on what they notice. This is a great way to engage all learners in a classroom by creating a low-stakes invitation to share their observations, as they are sharing only what they notice. I create a graphic organizer containing the questions below to record observations and thinking. There

is also a helpful resource that I include in the teacher resource section on four quadrant art analysis.

Title of the Piece: _____

What do you think the title means?

Break the piece into four sections. Carefully describe what you see in each section.

Section 1	Section 2
Section 3	Section 4

Analyze the piece. What do you think it means? Talk about your observations.

Research the piece. What do others think it means?

Reflect. After our class conversation, what do you think about the piece? Do you agree or disagree with what other people think?

Strategy Two: Revisionist Narratives/Interrogating Authorial Intent

Another strategy that I would like to explore to bring more balance to the unit that I created with Jessica Brantley is exploring one piece a bit deeper, specifically considering revisionist narratives. One of the paintings that we already read and discuss is Norman Rockwell's *The Problem We All Live With*. In this piece, Rockwell's decided to go into a different direction and explore issues that many of his followers were unaccustomed to him tackling such as racism and events in the South during the Civil Rights Movement.³⁰

In thinking about the possibilities of having my students engage deeper with the work, I would want my students to rewrite or reinterpret text from the perspective of marginalized characters or groups, offering alternative narratives that center their experiences and voices. For example, they might reimagine a classic novel from the viewpoint of a Black protagonist, providing insights into their thoughts, feelings, and struggles that were previously ignored or misrepresented. I think a piece that might work well for this would be Norman Rockwell's *The Problem We All Live With*.³¹ This painting is easily accessible online by doing a quick Google search. I am going to explore why it is important to reconsider the point of view.

What would this painting or scene look like envisioned by a Black artist and in contemporary times? I would create an assignment in which students have the open-ended invitation to envision a critical response to the work after they fully understand the concept of counter-narrative.

Strategy Three: Opposing Viewpoints

Many educators pride themselves on creating activities that improve critical thinking. It is a term that is thrown around and has become so familiar that the original intent of it may be lost. When teachers want students to engage in critical thinking, we want them to be able to be objective while they analyze and evaluate information to form an insight or judgement.³² Being able to engage in critical thinking is so important for teachers to develop in students given the nature of public and political discourse today, given that so much attention and airspace is given to misinformation and disinformation. This skill is built in part by having students explore opposing viewpoints.

An opposing viewpoint directly contrasts a commonly held opinion on a subject. It often presents alternative

arguments based on different values, evidence, or interpretations. To build student capacity to consider interpretations that challenge or oppose dominant narratives, students first need to be able to consider different perspectives. This takes practice that we need to be mindful of and provide students in ways that make sense. Woodward (2005) argues that the media is filled with differing opinions that makes it difficult for individuals to determine who is most credible.³³ There is a series of books called *Opposing Viewpoints* that has issues and explores both sides of the issue; for example, "The Movie Industry Fosters Anti-Religious Attitudes" vs. "The Movie Industry Has Begun to Foster Respect for Religion." argument engages students to think about the "author's credibility, facts, argumentation styles, use of persuasive techniques, and other stylistic tools."³⁵ Being able to analyze different perspectives, evaluate evidence, and form reasoned opinions are some of the requisite skills for the work of developing counter-narratives. Creating counter-narratives involves constructing strong arguments and supporting evidence. By engaging with opposing viewpoints, students learn to anticipate objections, strengthen their own arguments, and effectively communicate their ideas. This process is essential for developing intellectual rigor and the ability to navigate complex issues.

Classroom Activities

I am envisioning this being a two and a half-week addition to a previously developed unit in which we treat the image as our primary text to make observations, engage in research, and discuss our research and observations. In this unit, I imagine exploring the five art pieces referenced in the unit using four quadrant analysis. To have a general idea of how I plan on organizing my approach, I am going to map out for you the work that will be done over the course of twelve days.

Day 1

Students will explore the piece *Washington Crossing the Delaware* (Emanuel Leutze, 1851). They will use Four Quadrant Art Analysis (see the strategy listed above) to closely view the four quadrants of the piece and list out the observations that they make. They will also engage in research about the piece using the following websites below and summarize their research based on what others have found (Google the titles to get live links):

- 10 Facts about Washington's Crossing of the Delaware River | George Washington's Mount Vernon
- Can a Painting Tell More Than One Story? #MetKids Looks at *Washington Crossing the Delaware* - The Metropolitan Museum of Art (metmuseum.org)
- Washington Crossing the Delaware | painting by Emanuel Leutze | Britannica

Day 2

Students will finish exploring the piece *Washington Crossing the Delaware* (Emanuel Leutze, 1851). They will complete the Four Quadrant Art Analysis by having a classroom conversation using the following questions below:

- What details in the painting catch your attention, and why do you think the artist included them?
- How does the artist show George Washington, and what does this portrayal suggest about him as a leader?

- What emotions or feelings does the painting create? How do the colors and composition contribute to the mood?
- What challenges might Washington and his soldiers have faced during the crossing, and how does the painting show these challenges? This is a good chance for you to share what you learned from your research.
- Why do you think this painting has become such an important image of American history?

Once the questions have been discussed, students will reflect using the last question that is part of the Four Quadrant Art Analysis: After our class conversation, what do you think about the piece? Do you agree or disagree with what other people think?

Day 3

Students will explore the piece *George Washington Carver Crossing the Delaware: Page from an American History Textbook* (Robert Colescott, 1975). They will use Four Quadrant Art Analysis (see the strategy listed above) to closely view the four quadrants of the piece and list out the observations that they make. I will introduce students to the concept of parody after we view by sharing this definition written on the board:

A parody is “a work that mimics the style of another work, artist, or genre in an exaggerated way, usually for comic effect.” *The Encyclopedia Britannica* observes that “parody is typically negative in intent: it calls attention to a writer’s perceived weaknesses or a school’s overused conventions and seeks to ridicule them. Parody can, however, serve a constructive purpose, or it can be an expression of admiration.”

They will also engage in research about the piece using the following websites below and summarize their research based on what others have found after I introduce the concepts of parody and satire (Google the titles to get live links):

- Robert Colescott's *George Washington Carver Crossing the Delaware: Page from an American History Textbook* | Sotheby's (sothebys.com)
- Figuring History - "George Washington Carver Crossing the Delaware," Robert Colescott (youtube.com) This is a Youtube video with a short artist statement from Colescott
- Lucas Museum Acquires Robert Colescott's 'George Washington Carver Crossing the Delaware' Painting for Record-Smashing \$15.3 Million From Sotheby's Auction-Culture Type

Day 4

Students will finish exploring the piece *George Washington Carver Crossing the Delaware: Page from an American History Textbook* (Robert Colescott, 1975). They will complete the Four Quadrant Art Analysis by having a classroom conversation using the following questions below:

- What colors and shapes do you notice in the painting? How do they make you feel?
- What do you see in the painting that stands out or looks different from what you might expect in a history book?
- What was your first thought when you saw the painting? Did it surprise you?
- Why do you think the artist chose to show George Washington Carver in a scene that is usually associated with George Washington? Talk about your research.
- How are George Washington Carver and George Washington similar and different?
- What do you think the artist is trying to say with this painting?

Once the questions have been discussed, students will reflect using the last question that is part of the Four Quadrant Art Analysis: After our class conversation, what do you think about the piece? Do you agree or disagree with what other people think?

Day 5

Students will explore the piece *Shadows of Liberty* (Titus Kaphar, 2016). They will use Four Quadrant Art Analysis (see the strategy listed above) to closely view the four quadrants of the piece and list out the observations that they make. They will also engage in research about the piece using the following websites below and summarize their research based on what others have found (Google the titles to get live links):

- *Shadows of Liberty - e pluribus: Out of Many* (nationalacademy.org)
- *Titus Kaphar on Putting Black Figures Back Into Art History and His Solution for the Problem of Confederate Monuments* (artnet.com)
- *Ten Facts About Washington & Slavery | George Washington's Mount Vernon*

Day 6

Students will finish exploring the piece *Shadows of Liberty* (Titus Kaphar, 2016). They will complete the Four Quadrant Art Analysis by having a classroom conversation using the following questions below:

- What do you notice about the painting (like the person depicted, his pose, and any notable details like clothing or expressions)?
- How does the painting address the topic of slavery and its impact on American history?

I will introduce and define the term counter-narrative on the board (rewritten from the criteria I mentioned in the content section in a more kid-friendly way): A counter-narrative is a way of telling a story from the viewpoint of people who haven't always had the chance to share their experiences. These stories often go against the usual versions of events that we're used to hearing, which are often told by people in power. They give a voice to those who have been left out, allowing them to tell their own stories and share their true experiences. Counter-narratives don't just stick to simple or one-sided versions of events. They explore the different feelings and challenges that people faced in history.

- How is this piece a counter-narrative?
- Whose viewpoint is being shared in this painting?
- How does this painting go against the usual version of how George Washington is portrayed?
- Who has been “left out” in the telling of history in this painting? How does the artist address this and what do you think about it?

Once the questions have been discussed, students will reflect using the last question that is part of the Four Quadrant Art Analysis: After our class conversation, what do you think about the piece? Do you agree or disagree with what other people think?

Day 7

Students will read the *Chicago Tribune* article: “Johnson to remove George Washington statue from outside his City Hall office (msn.com)” regarding Chicago’s Mayor Johnson’s recent decision to relocate a statue of George Washington currently outside of the mayor’s office to another location. I will model for students the form of a letter to mayor and project it for students to refer to as they write. Students will need to take a position in

their letter to the following question: "Do you agree or disagree with Mayor Johnson's decision to relocate the statue based on our research. Student responses will be mailed to Mayor Johnson's office.

Day 8

Students will explore the piece *American Gothic* (Grant Wood, 1930). They will use Four Quadrant Art Analysis (see the strategy listed above) to closely view the four quadrants of the piece and list out the observations that they make. They will also engage in research about the piece using the following websites below and summarize their research based on what others have found (Google the titles to get live links):

- American Gothic (painting by Grant Wood) | Description & Facts | Britannica
- How American Gothic became an icon (bbc.com)
- How American Gothic became an icon (youtube.com)-a short Youtube video
- American Gothic Meaning: Grant Wood Painting Interpretation & Analysis (legomenon.com)
- Great Depression | Definition, History, Dates, Causes, Effects, & Facts | Britannica

Day 9

Students will finish exploring the piece *American Gothic* (Grant Wood, 1930). They will complete the Four Quadrant Art Analysis by having a classroom conversation using the following questions below:

- What stands out to you about the way the two people are dressed and what they are holding?
- How would you describe the facial expressions on the faces of the man and woman? Why do you think the artist decided to give them the expressions he did?
- What do you think this painting tells us about life in rural America during the time it was painted?
- What mood is created for you as a viewer? What makes you feel that way?
- Why do you think the painting is called "American Gothic?" Google the meaning of Gothic" consider why the artist might have used this term for a painting of ordinary people.

Once the questions have been discussed, students will reflect using the last question that is part of the Four Quadrant Art Analysis: After our class conversation, what do you think about the piece? Do you agree or disagree with what other people think?

Day 10

Students will explore the piece *The New American Gothic* (Criselda Vasquez, 2017). They will use Four Quadrant Art Analysis (see the strategy listed above) to closely view the four quadrants of the piece and list out the observations that they make. They will also engage in research about the piece using the following websites below and summarize their research based on what others have found (Google the titles to get live links):

- <https://www.artofit.org/2021/04/03/the-new-american-gothic-by-criselda-vasquez-oil-on-canvas-72-x-48/> -This link includes an image and artist statement.
- Latinx Artist Criselda Vasquez Paints A Dedication To La Lucha (boldlatina.com)
- How the news media portray Latinos in stories and images (journalistsresource.org)

Day 11

I will revisit the term counter-narrative that was defined on the board earlier (rewritten from the criteria I

mentioned in the content section in a more kid-friendly way): A counter-narrative is a way of telling a story from the viewpoint of people who haven't always had the chance to share their experiences. These stories often go against the usual versions of events that we're used to hearing, which are often told by people in power. They give a voice to those who have been left out, allowing them to tell their own stories and share their true experiences. Counter-narratives don't just stick to simple or one-sided versions of events. They explore the different feelings and challenges that people faced in history.

- How is this piece a counter-narrative?
- Whose viewpoint is being shared in this painting?
- How does this painting go against the usual version of how immigrants are portrayed in the news?
- Who has been “left out” in the telling of history in this painting? How does the artist address this and what do you think about it?

Once the questions have been discussed, students will reflect using the last question that is part of the Four Quadrant Art Analysis: After our class conversation, what do you think about the piece? Do you agree or disagree with what other people think?

Day 12

The Problem We All Live With, Norman Rockwell, 1963

I want students to create a counter-narrative to this piece. We would revisit the student-friendly definition that I have developed. What would this painting or scene look like envisioned by a Black artist and in contemporary times? I would create an assignment in which students have the open-ended invitation to envision a critical response to the work after they fully understand the concept of counter-narrative. They can respond by making another piece of art, writing a song or poem, or another open-ended way of expressing their thinking.

Resources

Helpful Teacher Resources

“Conversations from the Classroom: An Introduction to Visual Literacy: Four Quadrants.” n.d. Conversations from the Classroom. Accessed July 13, 2024.

<https://www.conversationsfromtheclassroom.org/2021/01/an-introduction-to-visual-literacy-four.html>. (This is a helpful explanation of how to build visual literacy by using four quadrant analysis.)

“Norman Rockwell in the Age of the Civil Rights Movement.” n.d. Google Arts & Culture.

<https://artsandculture.google.com/story/ZgWxOs7llcWMIg>. (This is a helpful resource that explains how Norman Rockwell moved in a new direction in his career during the 1960's tackling subjects related to racism.)

“George Washington and Slavery – Encyclopedia Virginia.” n.d. George Washington and Slavery.

<https://encyclopediavirginia.org/entries/washington-george-and-slavery/>. (This is a helpful resource for understanding how President Washington treated slaves at Mt. Vernon.)

“George Washington Carver Crossing the Delaware: Page from an American History Textbook.” n.d. Figuring

History. <https://figuringhistory.site.seattleartmuseum.org/robert-colescott/george-washington-carver-crossing-delaware-page-american-history-textbook/>. (This website is useful because it includes an interactive version of Colescott's painting in which you can hover over the painting and various aspects of the painting are explained in detail.)

Gurney, Tom. "American Gothic by Grant Wood." [Www.thehistoryofart.org](http://www.thehistoryofart.org). Accessed July 16, 2024. <https://thehistoryofart.org/grant-wood/american-gothic/>. (This article contains a very useful overview and Youtube video explaining the art.)

"Latinx Artist Criselda Vasquez Paints a Dedication to La Lucha." 2018. BoldLatina. July 9, 2018. <https://boldlatina.com/latinx-artist-criselda-vasquez/>. (This website has an explanation of Criselda's Vasquez's work and as well as a couple of other pieces that she has created.)

"LitCharts." LitCharts. <https://www.litcharts.com/literary-devices-and-terms/parody>. (This is just a brief definition of parody as a genre for someone who is unfamiliar with it.)

Raúl, Alberto, and Mora. 2014. "Key Concepts in Intercultural Dialogue," no. 36. <https://centerforinterculturaldialogue.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/key-concept-counter-narrative.pdf>. (This resource is helpful because it provides a concise explanation of counter-narrative with a short bibliography of suggested resources for individuals who would like to dig deeper into counter-narrative.)

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"English Language Arts Standards » Reading: Informational Text » Grade 6." *English Language Arts Standards » Reading: Informational Text » Grade 6 | Common Core State Standards Initiative*. (accessed June 23, 2024). <http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/RI/6/>.

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"'The New American Gothic' by Criselda Vasquez (Oil on Canvas 72" X 48')." 2021. Artofit. April 3, 2021. <https://www.artofit.org/2021/04/03/the-new-american-gothic-by-criselda-vasquez-oil-on-canvas-72-x-48/>.

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Appendix on Addressing District Standards

This is work that is directly aligned with the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) for 6th grade English Language Arts. Students are expected to be able to "trace and evaluate the argument and specific claims in a text, distinguishing claims that are supported by reasons and evidence from claims that are not" (CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.6.8). Having students develop a counter-narrative is the next logical step from this work. Rather than just be able to pick a side, students can reimagine scenarios that position individuals that have been historically wronged or marginalized into positions of power and equity.

Another standard that students are expected to master is "cite textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text" (CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.6.1). Students will be listing their observations from each of the paintings while engaging in four quadrant analysis of each art piece. They will explain their observations, making initial inferences about what each art piece is about, and they will engage in reading, research, and discussion to refine their thinking further.

Another standard that that is explored heavily in the unit is "integrate information presented in different media or formats (e.g., visually, quantitatively) as well as in words to develop a coherent understanding of a topic or issue" (CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.6.7). Students will see different images that share common themes. For example, they will explore three different portrayals of George Washington. The exploration of portrayal of Washington is intended to complicate student thinking about him as a historical figure and consider how historical narratives are developed and questioned. The same logic applies to the Grant Wood and Criselda Vasquez art pieces. Both get students to question what is normative in American society. Students will see immediate parallels, but the different subject matter in each piece will lead to rich discussion of what it means to be the "ideal" American.

Notes

¹ "Twain," Chicago Public Schools

² Leutze, Emanuel, *Washington Crossing the Delaware*.

³ "George Washington Carver Crossing the Delaware: Page from an American History Textbook."

⁴ "Washington Crossing the Delaware." In *The New Dictionary of Cultural Literacy*, Houghton Mifflin

⁵ History.com Staff. "Washington Crosses the Delaware."

⁶ Stewart, Linda. "Washington Crosses the Delaware."

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- ¹⁰ "LitCharts." n.d. LitCharts. <https://www.litcharts.com/literary-devices-and-terms/parody>.
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- ¹² "Robert Colescott's 'George Washington Carver Crossing the Delaware: Page from an American History Textbook' from 1975 Comes to Auction."
- ¹³ Ibid
- ¹⁴ Younge, Gary, *Another Day in the Death of America: A Chronicle of Ten Short Lives*, page XVIII
- ¹⁵ Raúl, Alberto, and Mora, "Key Concepts in Intercultural Dialogue"
- ¹⁶ Kaphar, Titus, *Shadows of Liberty*
- ¹⁷ Kaphar, Titus, "Titus Kaphar Bio."
- ¹⁸ "George Washington and Slavery – Encyclopedia Virginia."
- ¹⁹ Wood, Grant, *American Gothic*.
- ²⁰ Vasquez, Criselda, *The New American Gothic*.
- ²¹ Gurney, Tom, "American Gothic by Grant Wood."
- ²² Haskell, Barbara, *Grant Wood: American Gothic and Other Fables*. *Google Books*, 8
- ²³ LiveNOW from FOX. 2023. "Trump Says Immigrants Are 'Destroying the Blood of Our Country' at Campaign Event | LiveNOW from FOX."
- ²⁴ Haskell, Barbara, *Grant Wood: American Gothic and Other Fables*. *Google Books*, 8
- ²⁵ Gurney, Tom, "American Gothic by Grant Wood."
- ²⁶ Ibid
- ²⁷ "'The New American Gothic'" by Criselda Vasquez, Artofit.
- ²⁸ Ibid
- ²⁹ Ibid

³⁰ “Norman Rockwell in the Age of the Civil Rights Movement,” Google Arts & Culture.

³¹ Richman-Abdou, Kelly. “Norman Rockwell’s ‘the Problem We All Live With,’ a Groundbreaking Civil Rights Painting.”

³² Dominello, Nickolas. 2021. “The Importance of Critical Thinking, for Students and Ourselves.”

³³ Woodward, John. *Popular Culture: Opposing Viewpoints*, introduction

³⁴ Ibid, 8

³⁵ Ibid, 9

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